



IBN SĪNĀ (Avicenna)

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(A. D. 980—1037)

AN INTRODUCTION

BY

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AN INTRODUCTION

The decision to observe during 1980-81 the 1000th birth anniversary of Abū 'Alī Ibn Sīnā, a great intellectual giant of the Orient was taken by the UNESCO. A great encyclopedist, poet, critic, physician, philosopher and scientist, he took like Aristotle all knowledge of his time as his field of study, and enriched diverse disciplines by his rare genius. In his 'Canon of Medical Science', he summed up the achievements made in the field of medicine of many nations. In the 12th century this work was translated into Latin and for five centuries served as a desk-book for many physicians throughout Europe. This is only one of his achievements and each one would be enough to raise anyone's stature to greatness in the global context. The events of the latter parts of his life which caused much travail and hardship to this great scholar and savant resulted in a long period of over eight centuries of destruction and retarded development in the whole region spanned by his activities. A new stage was reached

only in the third decade of this century, and this is pregnant with far reaching consequences. It is appropriate to hark back to the times when the period of enlightenment for this region had not expired, and was fully embodied in the person of Abū 'Alī Ibn Sīnā, more than anyone else.

LIFE

The celebrated Central Asian philosopher, scientist, physician and vizir Abū 'Alī al-Husayn b. 'Abd Allah b. Sīnā, known in the West as Avicenna, was born at Khormethan near Bukhārā in A.D. 980. His father 'Abd Allah hailed from Balkh but after assuming an office in Sāmānid administration migrated to Bukhārā where the boy Abū 'Alī received his early education. 'Abd Allah was influenced by Ismā'īlī propagators who frequently assembled in his house and discussed questions on philosophical subjects. By listening to these discussions. Abū 'Alī made acquaintance with Ismā'īlī tenets. "At the age of ten years", says Ibn Khallikān, "he was a perfect master of the Qur'ān and general literature and had obtained a certain degree of information in dogmatic theology, the Indian Calculus (Arithmetic) and Algebra."

With Abū 'Abd Allah an-Nātīlī, a pupil of 'Abdu'l Faraj aṭ-Tayyib, he studied the Isagoge

of Porphyry, Logic, Euclid and the Almagest. After an-Nātilī's departure to Gurgānj, Ibn Sīnā made independent but deep studies of classical texts and commentaries on natural philosophy, divinity and other sciences including medicine which he studied from the Christian physician 'Isā bin Yaḥyā. He grasped Aristotle's Metaphysics with the help of al-Fārābī's commentary. He was hardly seventeen when he was summoned by the Sāmānid prince Nūḥ b. Maṣṣūr on the behest of his court physicians, to cure him of some malady. This helped him to gain access to the splendid library of the Sāmānid princes in Bukhārā from which he benefited immensely as, according to his own account, "It contained many books the very titles of which were unknown to most persons and others which I never met before or since." By the time he was eighteen years of age he had mastered all the known sciences and at twenty one he had established his reputation as an outstanding physician and thinker and wrote his first philosophical work.

The collapse of the Sāmānid power about the end of the 10th century proved disastrous for him also. His stay at the court of the Ma'mūnī princes of Khwārazm was cut short when the ill-intended demand of Maḥmūd of Ghazna that the Khwārazmian prince despatch the intellectuals of his court including Ibn Sīnā

to Ghazna was disclosed. In the course of their flight from Khwārazm and wanderings through the deserts of Central Asia, Ibn Sīnā found himself bereaved by the death of his philosopher friend Abū Sahl Masīhī. The wanderings were to last to the end of his life except for a short interval during which he became the vizir of the Buwayhid prince Shams ud-Dawla of Hamadān. Political intrigues and court rivalries forced him to go into hiding on several occasions. He was imprisoned, escaped and then lived the last fourteen years of his life in relative peace at Isfahān. The court of 'Alā'u'd-Dawla b. Kākūyeh showed him befitting respect at Isafahān where nobles and commoners benefited from his long evening assemblies. In deference to the wishes of that Amir he undertook the construction of an observatory and also invented some instruments. During Mas'ūd Ghaznavī's attack on Isfahān in A.D. 1035, parts of Ibn Sīnā's personal library were plundered. Two of his important works, namely al-Hikmatu'l Mashriqiyyeh and al-Hikmatu'l 'Arshiyyeh were carried away to Ghazna. Later when the city was stormed by the Ghorid prince Husain b. Husain (Maliku'l Jabāl) these two volumes were set on fire. Having undergone many vicissitudes of sickness, imprisonment and threatened death, he ultimately died, perhaps

of an internal disorder in A.D. 1037 at Hamadān in Iran and remains buried in that town. A befitting tomb has been raised over his grave by the Iranian Government along with a small adjoining library in which manuscripts of some of his works have been preserved.

Ibn Sīnā was strongly built, with sharp features and was rather excessively indulgent. He generally found himself occupied with state affairs in the day but laboured by night on his great works ending up the schedule in music and drinking. He would write on horseback or in prison drawing material from no source other than his own extraordinary memory. He seldom cared to keep a copy of his writings but his enthusiastic pupils, particularly Jūzjānī, invariably preserved one for their own use.

Ibn Sīnā had known most of the men of repute of his times. At Khwārazm he had met Muḥammad as-Suhaylī, Abū Rayhān al-Bīrūnī. Abū Sahl Masīhī and Abū Naṣr ‘Arrāq. At Isfahān he met and exchanged letters with many more scholars of his day.

But a shortcoming of this great intellectual was his habit of uncharitable treatment of some of his contemporaries. "In his writings" says al-Baihaqī, "Abū ‘Alī has cast aspersions on at-Tayyib. Such disparagement and slander do not

behave a philosopher.” Once he appeared in the lecture room of Ibn Miskawayh, flung a walnut in front of him and asked him to find out its area to the last fraction. Ibn Miskawayh hurled it back at him together with a few volumes on ethics retorting, “Reform your morals before I compute for you the area of the walnut, for, you stand in greater need of reforming your morals than I to compute the area of the walnut.”

Ibn Sīnā's pupils were numerous and their names can be gleaned from the annals of al-Baihaqī, Ibn Abī Usaybi‘ā and Shahrastūrī. The most outstanding of them was Abū ‘Ubayd Jūzjānī who has left for us an authoritative record on the life of the great man.

Some Arabic verses incorporated by Ibn Usaybi‘ā in his work have been ascribed to Ibn Sīnā, particularly the *ayniyya*, a panegyric (*qasida*) dealing with the incarnation of a rational soul in the body and its return to the world of reality. Some Darī/Tājik verses ascribed to the Shaykh were compiled and published by Saeed Nafīsī in Teherān in 1951.

SOME OUTSTANDING WORKS

The corpus of Ibn Sīnā's works that has come down to us is considerable, but incomplete. The fundamental bibliography is that of

his pupil Jūzjānī. As many as 241 to 276 of his works authentic as well as apocryphal, have been listed, the total being believed to be about 400. Here are mentioned only a few of them :

Al-Shifa :

Extending over eighteen volumes, this work deals with logic, mathematics, natural science and metaphysics. The Section on logic, which forms an important part, comprises nine components of logic, viz, the Prologue and eight sections of Organon. The Section on Mathematics consists of the principles of Geometry, Arithmetic, Music and Physics. The Section on Natural Science encompasses discussions on the physical world, cosmos, creation, destruction, action, reaction, mineral wealth, meteorology, soul, plants and animals. In the Sections dealing with plants and animals, material has been drawn extensively from Aristotle's works. The Section on Metaphysics comprises ten discourses dealing with the kinds of the created objects, essence, matter, form, unit, unity, diversity, causation, type etc.

Al-Najat :

It is a comprehensive work on philosophical sciences and ranks supreme among the Peripatetic school. Extracts chosen by the author

himself as being the most characteristic make up the *Kitab al-Najat*, which, as we know, is not an independent redaction as was thought until 1937.

Al-Insaf :

According to Suhrawardī (d. A.H. 587) this most important work of Ibn Sīnā extended over twenty volumes and contained commentaries on all of his works. It was plundered during the sack of Isfahān and only some fragments of it survived. In a letter to Muḥammad al-Kiyānū, Ibn Sīnā laments the loss of the original script and regrets his inability to reproduce it "Because", says he, "I have now taken up the thread of discussions on thinkers like Alexandros d'Aphrodisias, Themistios, John of Philiponos and the rest of them."

Al-Isharat :

An abridgement of Ibn Sīnā's philosophical speculations, this work has been distributed into ten 'trends' (*nehj*) and ten 'modes' (*nemat*). The ten-fold 'trends' deal with different problems of logic whereas the 'modes' encompass various matters of metaphysics. To the scholars of Latin, this work is known by the title *Liber Alixarat*.

Hayy-bin-Yaqzan :

This treatise on mystic themes is an allegorical story of a sage (active intellect) taking the writer along with him to

the Spring of Life (truth) on the other side of Darkness, meaning that philosophy is on the other side of ignorance.

Al-Hikmatu'l-Mashriqiyeh/Mashriqiyin :

It is one of the most authentic works of Ibn Sinā. The author says his purpose in producing this work was to put forth the doctrines of the Baghdadian (eastern) school of philosophers against those of the Alexandrian (western) commentators of Aristotle, tracing the faults and shortcomings which had overtaken the Peripatetics. It consists of portions on logic, Natural Science, Mathematics and Metaphysics.

Al-Masa'ilu'l-'Ashra :

It comprises discussions on ten topics, viz. Primeval cause, Reality of Nature, Reality of Universal soul, the Sun, the Moon and the Stars, the Unity of the Existent, Intentional and Natural Act, Non-Being, the limits of the Existent, Relation between the deed and the doer, and should the Primeval be more than one ?

Fi M'arifati'n-Nafs :

This treatise consists of three chapters dealing with :

- a) the proof that the reality of Mind is distinct from the reality of Body.

- b) indestructibility of soul after the destruction of the body and,
- c) the grades of soul on the basis of blessedness and damnation.

The treatise opens with an epilogue on the three-fold world of Reason, Soul and Body.

Ahwalu'l-Nafs :

It has sixteen chapters with the major portion corresponding to the subject matter of *al-Najat*. It has been considered a prestigious work of Ibn Sīnā on his concepts of Human Mind. Its Dari/Tājik translation was probably done by himself.

Al-Faizu'l-Ilahi :

It deals with matters like revelation, inspiration, miracles, dreams, intuitions, wonders, magic and sorcery.

On Natural Science the Shaykh wrote as many as 18, and on Metaphysics about 12 well-known tracts and discourses.

A *sura* to *sura* commentary on the Qur'ān has also been ascribed to him. In it he has made an attempt to explain the themes through philosophical interpretations. Commentaries on two *suras* (*al Falaq* and *an-Nās*) were printed at Delhi in A. D. 1984.

A large number of letters exchanged

between Ibn Sīnā and some distinguished contemporary intellectuals like Abu Sa'īd Abu'l Khair (the famous Iranian mystic of the tenth century), Abul Hasan Bahmanyār b. Marzbān (Kiyā Raīs), Abū 'Ubayd Jūjānī and Ibn Zeyla have been preserved. The most important of these are those exchanged with Abū Rayḥan al-Bīrūnī, generally on subjects like Intellect, Creation, indivisible particle etc.

Among a few works of the Shaykh in Dari/Tājīk, the most outstanding is *Danish Nameh-e 'Alai* or *Hekmat-e 'Alai* dealing with logic, natural science, mathematics and metaphysics. Unfortunately death did not spare him to complete the portion on mathematics (astronomy, geometry, arithmetic and music) and the task was left to his pupil, secretary and disciple Abū 'Ubayd Jūzjānī to accomplish.

Al-Qanun :

For five hundred years Ibn Sīnā's *al-Qanun fi'l-tibb* (Canon of Medicine) was considered more important than the work of Galen on medicine. In this work Ibn Sīnā made an attempt to systematize all the medical writings available to him. The appendix to the proper compendium now lost, is reported to have contained his original case-records. The *Qanun* comprises five books on theoretical medicine,

uncompounded drugs, diseases and their treatment, general diseases and compounding of drugs. The section on Psychiatry is a detailed one. He wrote well on pleurisy, mediastinitis and contagiousness of phthisis. In diabetes he described increased appetite, thirst, polyuria, emaciation and gangrene. He described tracheotomy, lithotomy and treatment of empyema by operation and haemorrhoids by legature. He knew certain diseases spread through the agency of soil and drinking water. In the field of materia medica, Avicenna summarized all ancient knowledge and mentioned many drugs unknown to the Greeks. In all he treats 760 drugs including mandragora, hellebore, cannabis, opium and hemlock. The *Qanun* codified medical knowledge of the time in a clear and direct language.

CONTRIBUTION

Ibn Sīnā made original contribution to philosophy. In this field he is unsurpassed among the mediaeval Muslim philosophers. He wrote with clarity and precision and enhanced his work with independent speculative thought. Though primarily a philosopher and physician, he contributed also to the advancement of all the sciences that were accessible in his days ; natural history, physics, chemistry, astronomy,

mathematics, music etc. Economics and politics benefited from his experience as a statesman.

Ibn Sīnā did not strictly confine himself to any one particular school of ancient philosophers. Despite his intellectual nearness to the Aristotelian School, he did not hesitate to absorb some ideas of the Neo-Platonians. To some extent he followed the logic of al-Fārābī though, of course, he was also directly influenced by him in the concepts of the knowledge of God and metaphysics. In elucidating the logic of Aristotle and in bringing it to perfection, Ibn Sīnā occupies the most distinguished place. A task of vital importance which he accomplished while strengthening the foundations of logic was to introduce it to the Muslim world in a manner that it could prove useful in all branches of science. Logic, he says, is a theoretical art which introduces definition and syllogism to show the form and matter of which they are composed. Definition of a thing requires the knowledge of its essence and spirit.

Ibn Sīnā has left behind important works in all branches of theoretical and practical philosophy. The ultimate objective of practical philosophy is to arrive at the reality of the best objects of creation. In his ideas of natural science, Avicenna followed Aristotle. In the portions of

as-Sama' (la Physique), he introduces general matters of bodies like matter, form, motion, time, space etc. The discussions pertaining to four elements and their general laws like motion, disintegration and condensation, particularly in relation to rain, thunder, lightening, wind, earthquake, oceans and mountains have been taken up separately so that the scheme conforms to that of Aristotle's work on meteorology.

The subject matter of metaphysics to which Ibn Sīnā mainly directed his attention is the Free Being and its related matters like cause, effect, eternal, temporal, perfect, imperfect etc.

Just as Fārābī had overshadowed the fame of al-Kindī, so did Ibn Sīnā overshadow the fame of Fārābī and weakened his influence in generations to come. The fact is that both Fārābī and Avicenna had overshadowed their predecessors in exposition, systematization and ratification of the Peripatetic philosophy and in coordinating the philosophical concept of Aristotle and Plato with the commenataries of the Neo-Platonians. In upholding the fundamentals of Aristotelian philosophy which, however, had been brought nearer to those of Plato by the Alexandrians in a way that these appeared more Neo-Platonic than anything else, he was

only supplementing the task which Fārābī had undertaken to accomplish.

At the same time, his defending of the fundamentals of religion savours of the influence of the scholastics (*mutakallimun*) so much so that one feels he is a scholastic turned philosopher. His attempts in furnishing proof of prophethood and his explanation of matters like ultimate destination, revelation, intuition, miracle etc. together with his philosophical interpretation of some portions of the Qur'ān, reminiscent of the methods of the Mu'tazila of the tenth century, bring him very close to the scholastics.

But in fact Ibn Sīnā did not strictly follow any of the three most influential schools of thought, i.e. the Peripatetic, the Scholastic and the Neo-Platonist. He rather accepted only that much from them which conformed to his own thought. This is why he has been subjected to criticism and attack by some of the followers of Peripatetic school like Ibn Rushd (Averroes), on the one hand, and by the scholastics like al-Ghazali on the other. By accepting some views of the scholastics, by syncretising his own concepts with the principles of mysticism (*tasawwuf*) and lastly by coming nearer to religion in certain matters, he introduced a new school of thought in the history of Islamic philosophy. Therefore

by widening the scope of his philosophical speculations in a way as to encompass all branches of science, he rightly may be considered the Aristotle of the Islamic world. "Throughout the middle ages", says Dietreci, "Avicenna was the teacher of Europe."

However though Ibn Sīnā's concept of 'illuminative' (*ishraq*) borrowed from Fārābī and the Neo-Platonians was sound enough for a Muslim philosopher to accept without jeopardizing his belief in one-ness of God, yet his interpretation and elucidation of the Qur'ānic verses done with a view of making the Muslims accept the Aristotelian and Plotinian concept of creation as given in *Theologia* and *Enneades* respectively, made him a heretic and atheist in the eyes of the zealots. No less an intellectual and follower of Peripatetic school than Ibn Rushd subjected Ibn Sīnā to severe criticism and censure on this count. Opposition to Ibn Sīnā's thoughts and even their denunciation was a common phenomena in the eleventh and twelfth century. In fact it was the hatred and malice which these zealots nursed against rational sciences, particularly metaphysics, in those days. Ibn Sīnā's works were declared by them as misleading and deserving to be destroyed. Ibnu'l Athīr tells us that Qaḍī Ibnu'l Markham's arrest and confiscation of his library under the

orders of Caliph al-Mustanjid was followed by the burning of all books on the sciences of philosophy in that library including Ibn Sīnā's *Kitab al-Shifa* and the *Tracts* of the Ikhwān. A formidable opponent of Ibn Sīnā among the Scholastics (*mutakallimun*) was al-Ghazālī who ventured to write a whole volume (*Tahafatū'l Filasafa*) in denunciation of earlier philosophers, Abū 'Alī Ibn Sīnā in particular.

But it was the harsh and inimical criticism of Ibn Sīnā in the eleventh and twelfth century which made his concepts widespread among the Muslim intellectuals. His opponents were obliged to study his work before refuting them. Even some of them, in order to gain reputation as his opponents and critics, undertook to study his works in detail. This is the reason why the works of Avicenna were needed to be profusely copied and circulated among people far and wide.

His works, particularly *al-Qanun* and *al-Shifa* contributed in their own way to the first Renaissance in Southern Europe though its results did not naturally spare Ibn Sīnā himself. St. Thomas Aquinas embodied proofs of Avicenna's *al-Shifa* in Catholic theology particularly the matter of difference between essence and existence. Avicenna also influenced to some extent the

development of thought in the Franciscan order. Roger Bacon and Duns Scotus, too could not escape his influence. In this way, Ibn Sinā, the great intellectual of the Orient influenced the onset of Renaissance in Europe.

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